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## **“Stay disconnected”: Eventising *Star Wars* for transmedia audiences**

Emma Pett,  
University of East Anglia, UK

### **Abstract:**

In the run up to the release of *The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015), a proliferation of attractions and interactive screenings emerged around the *Star Wars* franchise. This article primarily explores participant responses to one of these events, Secret Cinema’s staging of *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980), which ran from June to September 2015 in London. Alongside this, discussions of the *Star Wars* at Madame Tussauds exhibition are also considered, as a different kind of immersive attraction that a number of the research participants visited during the same period. Using original qualitative data, the article examines audience experiences of these events in three key ways. Firstly, it explores responses to both the formal and informal participatory elements of the immersive experience, such as interactive sets, personalised address, audience performance and cosplay. Secondly, the article considers issues of ‘liveness’ and exclusivity, analysing the relationship between the contemporary immersive experience and its cultural forerunner, the cult film screening. Finally, it explores responses to branding strategies and the commercial culture surrounding the attractions, interrogating the ways in which these heighten, inhibit or otherwise effect audience participation and enjoyment of them.

**Keywords:** Cult screenings; immersive; participatory; Secret Cinema; *Star Wars*; transmedia

### **Approaches to Immersive Cinema: Exhibition, technology and audience interaction**

Since the inception of Secret Cinema in 2007, immersive film events have become an increasingly popular form of cinematic entertainment in the UK and elsewhere. As one *Evening Standard* journalist wryly mused in August 2015, ‘unless you’re interacting with props or downing themed cocktails, you’re not getting the most out of cinema’ (De Souza

Crook, 2015). The range of *Star Wars*-themed immersive attractions promoted across different exhibition contexts prior to the release of *The Force Awakens* in 2015 might suggest that the appeal of event-led cinema and interactive media is cross-generational and demographically diverse – and perhaps more closely linked to established fan loyalties than to the appeal of the immersive experience in and of itself. Some of these attractions, such as the heavily branded *Star Wars* at Madame Tussauds and Legoland's *Star Wars* Event Days, were marketed for a broad, family-oriented demographic, extending existing consumer loyalty across new, transmedial spaces (Murray, 2005; Jenkins, 2008). Other events, such as Secret Cinema's summer season of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980/2015) and the Prince Charles Theatre's one-off screening of *Return of the Jedi* (1983/2015) traded on notions of exclusivity, community and 'liveness' (Auslander, 1999), thereby affecting a more cult-like sensibility (Mathijs and Sexton, 2011; Middlemost, 2014). Notably, Secret Cinema's high profile 'Stay Disconnected' campaign for *The Empire Strikes Back*, inviting participants to join 'Rebel X' and gather at secret locations across London, employed a commercial re-working of subcultural capital and being 'in the know' (Thornton, 1993). As with their previous staging of *Back to the Future* (1985/2014), it has been suggested that such high profile promotional strategies create a tension between the expectations of Secret Cinema's existing following, an 'early adopter 'hipster' elite', and fans of the highly popular eighties film (Atkinson and Kennedy, 2015a). Discussions such as these, circulating around audience engagement and taste, invite a more in-depth audience study to investigate what the actual enjoyments and meanings derived by participants from these immersive events and attractions are: this is the research question that this small-scale study sets out to explore.

Existing theoretical frameworks for understanding immersive forms of cinema tend to focus on three overlapping areas: their contexts of exhibition, the technologies they employ and the experience of their participants. The first of these approaches has most frequently been considered from a historical perspective. Oliver Grau (2003) and Alison Griffiths (2003, 2008) both contextualise the recent phenomena of interactive media and its associated technologies within a broader framework of developments in panoramic spectatorship. The historical precursors for the array of immersive entertainment available to twenty-first century audiences identified by Grau and Griffiths are many and varied; indeed, Griffiths contends that 'there are so many antecedents for today's so-called "immersive and interactive new media" that a moratorium might be warranted on the use of the phrase' (Griffiths 2008: 4). Early cinema scholarship also offers an alternative history of moving image narrative and storytelling techniques, interpreting them as a series of technological advancements in the quest to create the perfect illusion of an all-encompassing fictional space. In this respect, technological developments such as 3D or Smell O' Vision are valued as important steps towards this primary goal, rather than being dismissed as gimmicky anomalies (Grau 2003; Holmberg 2003).

Nineteenth-century panoramas and early forms of cinema, with their diverse patterns of promotion and exhibition, both offer useful parallels for considering their contemporary counterparts. The frequently discussed relationship between early film-going

experiences and amusement parks (Dobryden 2014; Gunning 2004), where many 'novelty' films of the era were exhibited, provides one way for considering the exhibition context of staged cinematic experiences such as those offered by Secret Cinema. These historical para-cinematic sites of amusement, such as Coney Island and the Berlin Lunapark, gave early film-goers the opportunity to engage with the new medium of the moving image within a space which was primarily designated for participatory forms of entertainment. Similarly, contemporary immersive film events are frequently staged in parks and other public sites designed for an interactive audience experience, often on an impermanent basis.<sup>1</sup> However, Griffiths sounds a note of caution about over-emphasising a linear or causal relationship between panoramas and subsequent forms of moving image entertainment, arguing that they have co-existed historically and 'talk about one spawning the other is ridiculous' (Griffiths 2008: 41). Instead, she outlines an extended history of moving image spectatorship which moves away from established models involving 'the seated spectator in the darkened auditorium' and focuses instead on ways in which audience mobility within the viewing space is a key factor shaping the immersive experience. Following Griffiths' lead, this article thus sets out to consider the ways in which Secret Cinema offers a distinctive extension to the ritualised forms of established entertainment of its day – in this case, within multiplex cinemas and other designated exhibition spaces for watching films – and can be analysed in terms of its mobile, participatory environment and the various pleasures this facilitates

A final set of debates around immersive media examine the processes of mental absorption and emotional investment in the film's narrative world. Grau argues that immersion is a mentally absorbing process of transformation, from one state to another, which is characterised by a decreased sense of critical distance, and a corresponding increase in emotional investment (Grau 2003). This form of mental absorption has been discussed by several scholars in relation to the 'distraction' of 3-D and 4-D cinema which, although designed to enhance audience interaction and immersion within the film's narrative, can sometimes produce the opposite result. Philip Sandifer is amongst those who critique 3-D technologies for the problematic way in which they can make audiences feel self-conscious, thus undercutting the illusion of "being there". Sandifer suggests that 'rather than being immersive, 3-D film is profoundly bound up in an act of spectatorship whereby the theater, instead of disappearing, is made even more conspicuously visible' (2011: 69). However, this critique of 3-D cinema has been contested in several ways. Barbara Klinger, for example, argues that film-makers have successfully deployed 3-D cinema's features as a means to enhance storytelling techniques. Klinger argues that 3-D cinema 'achieves a "new normal" not in terms of diffusion, but through a core visual grammar that defines how stories are conveyed' (Klinger 2011: 424). In particular, Klinger argues that the use of negative and positive parallax to create a three-dimensional effect can be understood as an extension of the established visual grammar of 2-D cinema:

Mining film space to the horizon, positive parallax draws on deep focus cinematography, an established aspect of 2D cinema. In deep focus, all

three layers of space in a shot – foreground, middle ground, and background – are sharply rendered. Every 3D film exploits positive parallax to some extent. Like negative parallax, this kind of dimensionality elicits a sense of spaciousness, often amplified by dynamic camera movements; here, though, audiences have extensive internal views of images (Klinger 2011: 426)

Similarly, other scholars exploring 3-D cinema, such as Miriam Ross, have discussed the ways in which technological innovations facilitate particular forms of audience immersion. These include discussions of stereoscopically-induced types of sensory engagement (Griffith, 2008) or what Ross has called 'hyper-haptic visuality' (Ross 2015). These debates raise issues around the question of how audiences immerse themselves in narratives; a further area this research sets out to consider, then, is whether spectacle functions as a disruption to narrative immersion for the audiences attending the staging of Secret Cinema's *The Empire Strikes Back*.

The issue of mental absorption and its disruption/enhancement of audience immersion via technological innovation is pertinent to any analysis of Secret Cinema's staged events, in which the re-enactment of key sequences from the film offer the audience a live spectacle alongside the screening of the actual film. At such moments, the action is played out simultaneously in two parallel spaces, offering participants the choice, or dilemma, of which version to watch. A key difference between this kind of immersive cinema and the 3-D experience, however, and one which this article will consider, is that while 3-D cinema enhances (or disrupts) the viewing experience within one narrative space, the spectacle created by Secret Cinema involves action taking place simultaneously in two separate areas of the viewing space.

The employment of re-enactment and theatrical spectacle means that, in some respects, the kind of immersive cinema experience devised by Secret Cinema has more in common with recent trends in immersive theatre than stereoscopic cinema. Theatre companies such as Punchdrunk, for example, specialise in staging productions that are structured around promenade performances and interactive narrative elements which the audience are actively encouraged to participate in. Research on audience responses to these productions has also addressed issues around participant immersion in the constructed narratives. In her study of audience responses to Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death*, Rose Biggin notes that

the relationship between immersive experience and emotional distance comes ... into question, with many respondents describing their experiences with a critical detail that suggests a dual perception between, for example, the actor and the character. This implies a conception of immersive experience often missing from wider discourse: one where immersion and

distance do not work as a binary, but instead have a reciprocal relationship, informing each other in the moment (Biggin 2015: 315-6).

Biggin's research findings therefore bring into question the binary set up by Sandifer and Grau between emotional investment and critical distance, suggesting that for some participants these two states might co-exist in a mutually beneficial relationship during the immersive experience. Another area this study will consider, then, is the extent to which critical detachment and emotional involvement co-exist in the responses offered by the interviewees who discuss their enjoyment of the Secret Cinema event.

However, there is one significant difference between the immersive productions staged by Punchdrunk and Secret Cinema: this lies in the way in which they encourage participants to identify as individuals. Although Secret Cinema participants are given individual identities and provided with descriptions of suggested costumes, the narrative of the event is structured to encourage the audience to feel part of Rebel X; there is a strong sense of the event being conceived as a communal experience. Punchdrunk, on the other hand, encourages its participants to separate themselves from their friends upon entry into the performance space, and experience the narrative as an individual. As Biggin observes, 'Punchdrunk attempt to make literal the theatrical truism that every spectator has their own unique experience' (Biggin, 2015: 304). In this respect it seems that Secret Cinema perhaps has more in common its cultural forerunner, the cult film screening. A final way in which this article will consider notions of immersion, then, is in the light of the communal experience and what it offers to the event participants.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative data discussed here was collected between May and September 2015. The analysis draws in particular on eight interviews conducted with participants who had either attended Secret Cinema's *The Empire Strikes Back* or its ancillary/promotional events which were staged simultaneously throughout the summer; these included the event launch at Alexandra Palace in May, and the recreation of an interactive Mos Eisley Cantina at Hoxton Town Hall, which was operational at weekends across the summer. Four of the interviewees had also visited Star Wars at Madame Tussauds during the same timeframe, and discussed their experiences of this attraction as well. The interviews followed a semi-structured schedule of questions that was designed to elicit discussion around four key areas: their position as fans (of the *Star Wars* franchise, Secret Cinema, or both), their engagement with the immersive elements of the event, their views on branding and how this intersected with their enjoyment of the event and the social and cultural dimensions that attending the event held for them [see **Appendix 1**]. The interviewees were recruited in two ways: at the Secret Cinema event and via social media. While an attempt was made to get an even gender balance across the sample (four male and four female participants were interviewed), the age of the interviewees reflected that of the attendees of the Secret Cinema event, in that they were all between 18 and 45 years old. However, as a very small

sample of a much larger audience, this data does not set out to be in any way representative of audiences for immersive cinema in general; rather it aims to offer some initial insights in the rapidly evolving Immersive cinema entertainment industry, as a preliminary to a larger audience research project to be conducted in the future.

A second element of this research methodology was observational, in that I attended the event myself and reflected on the experiences I had at both the main staging of *The Empire Strikes Back*, and at the ancillary attractions and promotional events put on by Secret Cinema throughout the summer of 2015. Virginia Nightingale argues that the quality of observation-based research, in which the researcher situates themselves within the community they are researching, depends on the extent to which they acknowledge and interrogate their role, rather than the degree to which they are immersed within the community (Nightingale 2008: 128). As a both a lifelong *Star Wars* fan and someone who has attended previous *Secret Cinema* events, I was clearly predisposed to enjoy the immersive events staged in the run up to the release of *The Force Awakens*; and as an audience researcher this would, in turn, impact on the design and execution of the research project. The analysis of the qualitative data generated by the interviews is preceded by my own brief auto-ethnographic account of attending these events. This self-reflexive interrogation is undertaken with the intention of exposing, or at least setting out to uncover, the construction of fan identity and the ‘fragility of discursive accounts’ arising from it (Hills 2001:72). For this reason the auto-ethnographic account therefore involves a brief discussion of my childhood fandom of the franchise and my experience of attending other *Star Wars*-branded events during the summer of 2015.

### **“Chewie, we’re home”: an auto-ethnographic account**

My *Star Wars* fandom is strongly linked to the original trilogy (1977-83) and nostalgia for a period of my childhood when, between the ages of 8 and 11, much of my spare time was spent playing with *Star Wars* figures and recreating the sets with friends. However, this fandom did not develop to encompass the second trilogy, which I rejected as being “inauthentic” for a number of reasons; most of these were, on reflection, attempts to dignify my childhood love of the films by critiquing the performance, acting and dialogue of the second trilogy from an adult perspective. As a member of the generation who saw *A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) in cinemas when it was first released, these views are not uncommon. Will Brooker notes that ‘this group of fans tends to treasure the original trilogy as a nostalgic relic of childhood and to view the prequels with wariness or disappointment’ (Brooker 2002: 221). The build up to the release of J. J. Abrams’ *The Force Awakens* therefore excited me, along with many other fans of my generation, with its promise to integrate characters from the original trilogy into the new narrative, in much the same way as Abrams’ *Star Trek* reboot did in 2009. The opportunity to experience an immersive *Empire Strikes Back* event beforehand thus neatly played into both my childhood nostalgia for the original trilogy and anticipation surrounding the new film.



As a child I had enjoyed creating a replica of Tatooine out of a mound of sand left behind by builders on our street, so the adult experience of walking into a life-sized recreation of the planet, dressed as a female Han Solo-style mercenary, instantly rekindled my childhood sense of delight. It generated that “Christmas morning” sense of excitement. In particular, the frisson I experienced entering a recreation of the Mos Eisley cantina was further infused by a specific unfulfilled childhood longing to own the ‘Cantina Adventure Set’, a rare toy I only ever saw in brochures and spent years hankering after: Secret Cinema therefore offered me the opportunity to be physically united with my childhood object of attachment.<sup>2</sup> The highly interactive experience of visiting the Cantina nightclub set up at Hoxton Town Hall to promote the season of *The Empire Strikes Back* was, for these biographical reasons, as enjoyable as the main event. Arriving at the entrance to the Cantina, I was greeted by a scavenging Jawa who tried to pickpocket me and steal my Oyster card. As he darted around me, gabbling in what sounded like authentic Jawaese, I was instantly charmed by the intimacy of the encounter and offered him a playing card; this was exchanged for a marble, and through this trade I was inducted into the immersive fictional world of my childhood.

Whilst aware of the pleasure I was deriving from engaging with the lifelike replica of my childhood object of fandom, I also observed other participants struggling to engage with the actors playing recognisable roles from the film. When interrogated at the nightclub doorway for an entry password (supplied by Secret Cinema via email), one startled participant replied “I don’t know, I haven’t seen the film”; their lack of familiarity with the film lead them to suspect they were deficient in the cultural capital required to interact convincingly with the actors. In this way, Secret Cinema events are designed to downplay the mainstream branding of the franchise, and accentuate, via immersive roleplay, the potential for fans to display subcultural capital and being ‘in the know’. Austin has argued that audience research needs to acknowledge the power structures created by the industry, suggesting that a key problem associated with audience research is

a tendency to bracket off or underplay issues of industrial activity and power. Yet these operations are crucial in influencing and in some ways organizing (without fully fixing) film viewers’ production of uses, meanings and pleasures. Any consideration of popular film culture must engage with economic practices if it is to arrive at a clear picture of the interrelated processes which constitute this circuit (Austin 2002: 27).

In this scenario, then, the pricing of the event (entry to the nightclub was relatively cheap compared to ticket prices for the main event) was framed in a veil of exclusivity, via a password circulated online with the ticket purchase. In this way Secret Cinema’s “Stay Disconnected” and “Tell No One” anti-mainstream marketing strategies are extended, via their economic practices, to consciously imitate and invoke a cult sensibility; these economic practices generate consumer pleasure for those initiated and ‘in the know’, and



discomfort for those lacking the prerequisite (sub) cultural capital. In several respects, then, I was conscious of my cultural competences as a fan being manipulated as a consumer of a high-end immersive event; however, this awareness did not detract from my enjoyment of the experience.

In contrast to this, the *Star Wars* at Madame Tussauds interactive exhibition I attended earlier in the summer was promoted on the basis of its highly visible branding, courtesy of Disney. Here consumers were presented with the opportunity of buying photographs of themselves with waxworks of their favourite characters, all presented in a heavily branded *Star Wars* frame. Whereas the Secret Cinema event played to notions of authenticity which I associated with the first *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-83), the Madame Tussauds exhibition failed to resonate with my fan sensibilities in the same way. Without any opportunity to engage with and re-enact the narratives I valued as a child, my attention inevitably turned elsewhere; despite my intention not to focus on the ubiquitous branding that characterised the attraction, I found my overall experience of Madame Tussauds uncomfortable and not particularly enjoyable. The exhibition space was crowded and necessitated traipsing around a slightly claustrophobic building, viewing waxwork models of celebrities for over an hour, before actually reaching the *Star Wars* section of the exhibit. Although the economic practices employed by Secret Cinema were highly contrived, they nevertheless provided me with sense of cultural reassurance; in contrast, the overcrowded 'mainstream' environment of Madame Tussauds merely facilitated agitation and an overall sense of the inauthentic. Furthermore, whereas the Secret Cinema participants were predominantly middle class, or more likely to be in possession of disposable income, visitors to Madame Tussauds were more obviously tourists, which grated on my sense of identity as a London resident. A set of cultural and classed predispositions therefore played out in my experience of the two attractions.

### **Formal and Informal Participation: Narrative, Performance and Immersion**

The first stage of the interviews focused on the immersive features of the event and the extent to which participants either engaged in the narrative created by Secret Cinema, or constructed their own narrative and performance within the mobile environment of the event [see **Appendix 1**: Questions 3-6]. This included prompting interviewees to discuss elements of the sets which they particularly enjoyed, moments when they interacted with the actors employed by Secret Cinema as characters from the franchise, and the extent to which they followed the instructions they had received regarding the costume and identity created for them by the organisers. These experiences were discussed and assessed by interviewees using a number of evaluative frameworks. The first of these focused on the degree of opportunity for audience involvement in the narrative. One interviewee, Kayla, evaluated her experience in terms of the extent to which she was presented with opportunities to engage with the interactive elements:

I enjoyed it much more than *Back to the Future* because I was given a mission,

I had to deliver an object to another character who would identify themselves to me in a particular way. It was really exciting, although I failed in my mission! The sets were amazing, I was actually scared when the Stormtroopers marched past in case I got arrested ... but luckily I didn't... the only aspect I wasn't so keen on was the stalls and the extent to which we were encouraged to spend money (Kayla, 26).

Kayla valued her Secret Cinema experience in terms of the level of her participation in the narrative, and the way in which it functioned to enhance her emotional investment in the event. Her description of this emotional investment, and the feelings of excitement and fear, is combined with a more critical evaluation of her experience as a consumer; this suggests that Rose Biggin's observations regarding participants of Punchdrunk's immersive theatre events are not dissimilar to some of those experienced by Secret Cinema attendees. Another interviewee makes a similar comment, focusing in particular on the sophistication of the interactive elements and noting that 'the missions I was sent on were complex and well-constructed, much more engaging than I had anticipated' (Ben, 33). The participants' discussion of engaging in the interactive elements of the narrative before the screening of the film implies that it heightened both the immersive qualities of the event, and audience enjoyment of them. However there is no suggestion that emotional involvement in the characters and set precludes their ability to critically analyse the event whilst they are immersed within it. Another interviewee, Lisa, who had not been to a Secret Cinema event before, discussed her particular enjoyment of the Tatooine set, stating that

it really felt like something special, there was loads to explore and see... stalls selling food and drink, t-shirts, posters and other stuff. I loved the details, the two suns projected on the walls, the recreation of Luke's house ... it really looked and felt the business to me, totally authentic (Lisa, 41).

All eight of the interviewees had very positive experiences of the Tatooine set, with several discussing its authenticity and attention to detail as being key to their enjoyment. One interviewee, Brett, spoke enthusiastically about the interactions with the actors on Mos Eisley set, and described an incident in which a Stormtrooper took one of his party hostage, which then meant that he and his friends had to spend ten minutes bartering to get him released from a prison cell; this encounter was recalled as one of the highlights of the evening, when he felt most strongly immersed in the fictional space.

Similarly, the staged spectacle of key sequences from the film during this stage of the event, prior to the screening, was also appreciated by all of the interviewees. These included descriptions of Luke Skywalker passing by them in his land speeder and re-enactments of brawls and fights in the Mos Eisley bar. Kayla recalled that

... the Bith Band were awesome, they were playing the Cantina tune and as

we ordered drinks, a cowboy ... I don't think it was supposed to be Han Solo ... he started talking to us and giving us advice about 'avoiding the spies'. It was great! The bar was filled with costumed actors and all around Mos Eisley there were these little tableau events taking place ... you couldn't see all of them, you just had to go with the flow... (Kayla, 26).

Only one of the interviewees, Tom, expressed some frustration at not having been able to see all of the re-enactments that were staged in Tatooine, commenting that he was 'disappointed to have missed some bits out ... one of my friends said he met Han Solo, so I'm not sure I got the most out of the whole thing, really' (Tom, 23). However, despite this sense of disappointment at 'missing out' on some aspects of the experience, Tom cited the sets, particularly on the Death Star, as being the most enjoyable aspect of the experience, noting that 'it was really impressive, the way they had re-created the ships and the details of the set within this disused warehouse ... the medal ceremony was brilliant, a real high' (Tom, 23). The utilisation of space and appreciation of the sets emerged, then, as a prominent factor in the interviewees' enjoyment of the immersive event. Their appreciation of the way in which the film sets were re-created elicited a display of subcultural capital and suggests, as Griffiths has argued, that the pleasures of immersive media are linked to 'embodied modes of encountering visual spectacle' and audience mobility in the viewing space (Griffiths 2008: 3).

This set of audiences responses contrasted, however, with discussions of the staged spectacle that took place during the screening, when participants were seated in a more conventional cinema space. One interviewee commented that:

I found it distracting when parts of the film were re-enacted during the screening, at the side of the auditorium. I wanted to watch the film, but I didn't want to miss out on the extra stuff ... so I ended up trying to watch both, which was kind of uncomfortable, and I ended up just sort of losing track of the narrative ... (Rebecca, 31).

This response bears some similarities to Sandifer's discussion of 3-D technologies and their potential to disrupt mental absorption in the narrative by highlighting the self-consciousness characteristic of the viewing context for the audience. However, what is notably different is that the action is taking place in two separate physical spaces, and the interviewee feels uncomfortable about having to choose which action to focus on. Another interviewee notes that 'the screening was fun, but that's not what I paid my money for ... it was the bit beforehand that really made it (Simon, 36). What emerges from this small sample of qualitative data, then, is a tendency amongst those interviewed to show greater appreciation and enjoyment of the immersed experience whilst mobile and able to traverse freely around the set.

## **Community, interaction and the cult sensibility**

Discussions of ‘cult’ audiences in relation to mainstream film texts have previously been considered in relation to *Star Wars* (Hunt 2003, Jenkins 2003), the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Hills 2005) and *Back to the Future* (Pett 2013). Whereas existing analyses of cult/mainstream audiences for the *Star Wars* franchise have hinged on the role of specialised fan knowledge (Hunt 2003), and the production of fan works (Jenkins 2003), these new, immersive *Star Wars* attractions facilitate a re-evaluation of cult/mainstream distinctions within the framework of a specialised, interactive transmedia culture. In particular, this study offers the opportunity to consider Secret Cinema’s staging of *The Empire Strikes Back* as a reinvention of the cult film screening. Although executed on a much larger and more overtly commercial scale than traditional cult screenings, there are nevertheless many similar characteristics which they share; while the *Star Wars* franchise might not be particularly offbeat or strange, Secret Cinema’s staging of *The Empire Strikes Back* clearly upsets traditional viewing strategies, involves an active fandom and reveals a complex and specialised relationship between the text and audience.

One emergent pattern of responses relating to audience interaction within the set revolved around the blurring of fantasy and reality, and participants’ inability to distinguish between other consumers and paid performers or producers. Simon is a long-term *Secret Cinema* fan, having attended five of their previous events. He particularly valued the extent to which other participants engaged in the interactive elements, and discussed them accordingly:

What I really enjoyed the most about the immersive side of it was not knowing who was an actor and who had bought a ticket ... some of the costumes were so good that it was impossible to tell, people were really going for it. So, I was sat next to a Jedi Knight in the bar, and I was thinking, shall I ask him for a clue ... but, you know, I wasn’t sure ... that was great, the kind of sense of a blurring of worlds, we had all entered this different space ... I think that’s what makes *Secret Cinema* a bit different (Simon, 36).

The blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers was therefore key to Simon’s enjoyment of the event, and offered him a unique experience of the text which couldn’t be found at regular screenings. In many ways, this echoes the pleasures experienced by cult communities, which is described in accounts of screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and similar texts (De Ville, Middlemost, 2014). As Mathijs and Sexton argue, one of the defining features of a cult film’s reception is that it is a collective process, and that this ‘is not just an aggregate of individual perceptions; it is more an impression of a collective effort that supersedes it (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 19). All of the interviewees discussed how important it was for them to attend the event with a group of friends or a partner with a similar passion for *Star Wars*; none of those interviewed attended the event on their own. It was the communal aspect of immersion and shared performance that formed the defining

feature of Simon's experience; however, for Simon, the pleasure taken in the collective effort of this communal performance superseded his *Star Wars* fandom and any potential enjoyment to be taken in the recreation of the films' sets:

Yes, I suppose I'm a *Star Wars* fan, I mean I loved the first trilogy and I've re-watched it with my eldest son ... but I'm more into the way it's put on, the way you get involved in the storyline ... if some detail or something isn't correct and isn't like the film, that's not going to bother me or anything, it's more the overall feeling of immersion into this other world, and I think that worked really well with *The Empire Strikes Back*. It helped that it was an enclosed space, in the warehouse, I think ... you could forget about the outside world because you were totally shut off from it, you know ... but then there's this funny jarring thing when you see a Jedi Knight having a cigarette outside, and I kind of really like that too. (Simon, 36).

Simon's enjoyment in being a part of an ensemble performance of *The Empire Strikes Back* extended, then, to include those non-performative moments, when the roleplay was temporarily suspended during a cigarette break. This suggests that immersive events facilitate an enjoyment akin to that experienced by professional performers, who take pleasure in the conscious activity of entering in to and discarding a particular persona. He also demonstrates how significant the 'live' element of the event was, even in terms of the experience of the non-diegetic space outside of the Mos Eisley set.

Another participant, Ella, made a similar point about her enjoyment of the immersive element of the *Secret Cinema* experience:

I love meeting people in character, it's so much fun ... you can chat and discuss what's happening and you don't know anything about them ... and probably won't ever see them again. It's a strangely liberating experience, to be thrown together in this place that is both alien and incredibly familiar, and you have this intense experience, and then it's sort of over ... but going home on the tube, there's still a shared communality with other people who went, even if you don't say anything, you see the outfit or the scarf, and you know ... and then you send a picture to a friend, or tweet about it, you take it with you ... I think that's why some people go back again, it's an experience you want to continue and repeat, that gets better each time (Ella, 29).

Ella's discussion of her immersive experience highlights an interaction between spectacle and performance that carried over into her everyday life, again illustrating the way in which the communal aspect of the event created a cult-like bond between the participants. This collective experience contrasts with the accounts of Punchdrunk's highly individualised form of immersion, and could suggest that the *Secret Cinema* participants pre-existing fandom of

the *Star Wars* franchise played a significant role in their experience of the event, offering them a ready-made sense of communality that outlived the duration of the evening's entertainment.

### **Immersed in the *Star Wars* brand?**

Several of the *Star Wars*-themed attractions that proved to be highly popular over the summer of 2015 were marketed for a broad, family-oriented demographic; these attractions, developed by companies such as Lego and Madame Tussauds, aimed to develop existing fan loyalty for the franchise in new ways. Austin argues that 'promotion is a contractual process, inviting audiences to invest in a film, in exchange for anticipated pleasures and uses. Whether, and exactly how, viewers do so depends upon their particular situations, competences and dispositions' (2002: 27). Not only is this true of branding for *Star Wars* tourist attractions sanctioned by Disney, but also for Secret Cinema.

Although Secret Cinema built its brand on exclusivity and secrecy, the last few years have seen it develop an alternative marketing strategy built around new releases and the re-release of mainstream films such as *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985). As Atkinson and Kennedy note:

These commercial successes mark a notable shift in both the organisation's approach and the type of audiences they are starting to attract. The events, which have previously been marketed in a clandestine way via word of mouth and social media in which knowing audiences are instructed to "tell no one" are now being launched through high profile press releases" (Atkinson and Kennedy, 2015b: 2).

As already considered above in the auto-ethnographic account, Secret Cinema employs economic practices which are designed to appeal to a particular taste differential. As their productions have grown in size, scale and cost, however, this exclusive taste culture has become compromised. Secret Cinema's first big-budget staging of a mainstream film, *Back to the Future* (1985/2014) ran into trouble when inflated ticket prices combined with cancelled dates and lead to accusations of profiteering and exploitation by fans and cultural commentators alike. However, whereas the Secret Cinema brand has to be careful not to compromise its hipster credibility, other attractions are more high profile in their marketing of the *Star Wars* brand. The role of branding for both *Star Wars* attractions and Secret Cinema therefore felt like a key area to address in the research project; for this reason the interviewees were asked to discuss the significance the *Star Wars* brand holds for them, and a number of subsidiary questions linked to branding (see **Appendix 1**: Question 7). One interviewee responded that

I would probably go and see anything linked to the *Star Wars* brand, if I'm honest. I went to Madame Tussauds, which involved looking around the

whole place with a bunch of tourists just to see the *Star Wars* exhibition, but it was worth it in the end, I got some great photos ... not my favourite *Star Wars* attraction, but I wouldn't want to miss it either. I liked getting the official photo in the mounted frame with the logo on it. (Ahmed, 38).

This response indicates the importance and allure of the *Star Wars* brand for many of those attending the Madame Tussauds attraction. For dedicated fans such as Ahmed, the brand in itself is a marker of quality and therefore tourist events such as the one staged at Madame Tussauds do not present a taste conflict for him. Other interviewees who took their young families to see the interactive exhibition were similarly positive about the experience:

Yeah, we did go to Madame Tussauds with the kids, it was quite good fun, they loved it and the *Star Wars* bit was definitely the best bit ... I probably enjoyed it more than they did (Simon, 36).

Simon's discussion of attending this family-oriented attraction illustrates how brand loyalty is extended across transmedial spaces. This process is facilitated by an inter-generational enjoyment of the attraction; because Simon's children were delighting in the interactive exhibition, he became more likely to embrace the experience himself. However, there were some exceptions to this position, one being articulated by a female interviewee who found the branding problematic:

I find all the branding and merchandise really off-putting ... it's spoilt it a bit for me since Disney took over *Star Wars* and it's all geared towards the family demographic, parents who want to reminisce and who watch it with their children. But I realise I was a child when I watched it, so that sounds a bit hypocritical ... (Lisa, 41).

What is interesting here is that, as an adult visiting the attraction without children, Lisa seems more inclined to critique the branding, even though she is aware that as a child she well have enjoyed it. Simon and Lisa's responses suggest, then, that an inter-generational appreciation of branded attractions might facilitate a less critical response; this, in turn, could be linked to a sense of nostalgia for childhood pleasures which is acknowledged more readily by the adult who is accompanied to the attraction by his own children.

## **Conclusions**

This small scale study offers a number of preliminary insights into the ways in which audiences engage with and enjoy immersive cinematic events. Firstly, it reveals some of the complex ways in which immersion is experienced: as a co-existence of emotional engagement and critical distance, and as a mobile experience that is not constrained by the conventions of a seated auditorium. Key to this immersive enjoyment of Secret Cinema's



staging of *The Empire Strikes Back* was the authenticity of the set and encounters within it. Following on from this, the findings suggest that interactivity and performance are valued in particular ways, highlighting an appreciation of ensemble performances and the blurring of boundaries between producers, performers and consumers. These are linked to a valuation of interactive narratives, which facilitated a cult-like communality that extended beyond the duration of the event itself.

The audience engagements with and valuation of the Secret Cinema event can also be considered in the context of *Star Wars* fandom more broadly. Some interviewees demonstrated a strong valuation of the *Star Wars* brand in the context of other attractions, such as the Madame Tussauds exhibition, and enjoyed the opportunity to shop for souvenirs during the Secret Cinema event. While the production clearly attracted many *Star Wars* fans, as was evidenced in this small selection of qualitative data, there were undoubtedly many others who attended because they enjoyed Secret Cinema events in other ways. Finally, the data suggests that these findings can all be understood within wider industrial contexts, in particular the economic processes adopted by Secret Cinema to promote their event using commercial forms of subcultural capital. Interviewees such as Ella who discussed their enjoyment of the clandestine, communality of the shared experience also described the event as one they would want to repeat; in this respect, then, Secret Cinema successfully exploited many of the long-established features of cult film communities in their commercial re-working of an exclusive and niche film event.

### Biographical note:

Emma Pett is Lecturer in Film Consumption at the University of East Anglia. She has worked on collaborative research projects with the BBFC and BBC Cymru Wales, and has published on film reception and regulation in *The New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Participations*, *Cinephile* and *Cultural Trends*. Contact: [e.pett@uea.ac.uk](mailto:e.pett@uea.ac.uk)

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## Appendix 1: Interview Question Schedule

1. How did you find out about Secret Cinema's staging of *The Empire Strikes Back*? Through a friend? Via the Internet? Via Secret Cinema marketing? If so, have you attended previous Secret Cinema events, or other similar immersive cinema events staged by different organisations? What do you enjoy about them?
2. Before you attended the event, did you consider yourself a fan of *Star Wars*? Had you attended any other *Star Wars* events, like fan conventions or other tourist attractions? If so which ones? Or were you a fan of Secret Cinema? If so, can you say a bit about what it means to you?
3. Did you attend any of the promotional events linked to Secret Cinema's *The Empire Strikes Back*, such as the launch or the Cantina at Hoxton Town Hall? If so, what was your experience of these events? If not, what was your reason for deciding not to go?
4. To what extent did you engage in the participatory elements of the event constructed by Secret Cinema? Did you follow the costume guidelines they provided for you? Did you try to engage in any missions that were set? Did you trade or interact with the actors playing recognisable characters? Did you construct your own narrative/performance/costume in a way not directed by the event organisers?
5. What did you think about the set and the overall staging of the event? Where there particular elements of it that you did or didn't appreciate? Which aspects did you enjoy the most? Can you describe them? Did you interact with elements of the set, such as the stalls or the bar? What were your experiences of these interactions like?

6. Overall, what was the most enjoyable part of the event for you? Can you describe what you enjoyed about it, and how this was different or similar to other immersive events you have attended?
7. Are you interested in the official Star Wars brand? Do, or have you ever, collected official *Star Wars* branded items? If so, what do they mean to you? Did the absence of official *Star Wars* branding at the Secret Cinema event affect your enjoyment of it? Has it drawn you to any other attractions, such as the one at Madame Tussauds?
8. How important was the communal element of the immersive experience for you? Did you go alone, with a friend/partner, or as part of a group? To what extent do you think this affected your enjoyment of the event?

## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Secret Cinema's screenings of *Back to the Future* (1985/2014) were staged at the Olympic Park in Stratford, London.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Cantina Adventure Set' now features on lists of rare *Star Wars* merchandise, mainly due to the mythical "Blue Snaggletooth" figure that came with it: <http://blog.paxholley.net/2010/02/19/the-6-rarest-and-most-collectible-vintage-star-wars-figures/>